

History Museums in the United States: a Critical Assessment

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Historian Sutton is the only contributor who uses no graphics as part of his attempt to describe and analyze regionalism in Illinois. This illustrates that historians as a group use graphics much less frequently than those in other social/behavioral science disciplines. Historians who use demographic and economic quantitative data could learn much in this regard from their fellow academics in related disciplines.

What is the significance, if any, of this volume for the study of Iowa history? Iowa is considerably less varied than Illinois. Unlike its neighbor to the east, no metropolitan area dominates the state to the extent that Chicago dominates, or did dominate, Illinois. Just as Iowa has no Chicago, it does not have a Chicago-type "suburban collar" that increasingly is becoming the most important part of the state in population, wealth, economic activity, and political influence. Lacking a Chicago, Iowa also lacks the large African-American population that has become a major factor in the life of both the city and the state. And Iowa lacks the sheer physical variety of a state that extends from Wisconsin to southern Kentucky and Missouri, and nearly to Tennessee and Arkansas. Iowa also lacks the ethnic diversity of Illinois, especially Chicago.

If Iowa is less varied than Illinois, it nonetheless is less homogeneous than we often assume. Its variety is apparent in many ways: in the quality of farmland, in ethnic settlement patterns, in church membership statistics, in differences in voting behavior from area to area. At least some of these variations have contributed to "geopolitical cleavages," that is, to political differences, often political conflict, between various parts of the state. These political differences are, in turn, related to other, most often ethnic and religious differences. Although this hardly leads to a need for a volume on substate regionalism in Iowa, it does underline the need to be sensitive to possible regional interpretations of political differences within the state, particularly during the pre-World War II years.

History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment, edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989. xxvi, 333 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL J. SMITH, PUTNAM MUSEUM

History Museums in the United States is a collection of essays about the challenges and opportunities facing history museums entering the 1990s. The editors, Warren Leon, formerly director of interpretation at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, and Roy Rosenzweig of the

history faculty at Virginia's George Mason University, have assembled twelve essays by fourteen authors drawn from both museums and universities. They have organized seven of their essays into a section reviewing the development and current state of history museums of various types—large city, living history, historic houses, pioneer museums, battlegrounds (Gettysburg is the subject of John S. Patterson's essay), and the new type of history museum exemplified by EPCOT and other theme parks. These all follow Gary Kulik's lead essay tracing the historical development of the museum exhibit as teaching/learning device. Having surveyed the range of American history museums, the volume turns in part two to a consideration of the major trend in American history since the 1960s, that is, the "new social history" and the degree to which it is being employed in museums. Here, the term *new social history* refers to historians' interest in and ability to study the people of the past in their daily lives, work, family relationships, community institutions, and so on. Often called history from the bottom up, or the history of everyday life, this technique has provided welcomed insights into the lives of women, minorities, workers, immigrants, and others who have too often been hidden beneath the printed pages of textbooks or omitted from exhibits dealing only with the political and social elite.

A 26-page introductory essay by editors Leon and Rosenzweig frames and previews the volume's contents. They note that the United States is home to an estimated three thousand history museums that treat national, state, and community history as well as an incredible range of special subjects from cowboys to toys, dolls to whaling. The majority of these institutions are operated by local historical societies. Another striking fact is that some 45 percent appear to be less than thirty years of age. Also important is the fact that more than two-thirds of these museums are operating with budgets under (often very much under) fifty thousand dollars per year.

The question this volume poses is, have museums made use of the insights on the past provided by the academies during the past thirty years? Not nearly enough, the editors and essayists respond. The point is, as the writers of this volume note, that it has not been easy to move museums from "open storage" displays of all that they own to intellectually framed exhibits combining ideas and artifacts into an evocative learning experience for the user. Leon and Rosenzweig point out some of the most obvious constraints, including the availability of the necessary resources of staff, time for research, training in the new methodologies, and, of course, money. The small, young, poor museum profiled in their introduction is proof in itself of the problems faced by the museum community. The editors argue

that there are two other key constraints to the presentation of exhibits based on the new social history and dealing with subjects such as poverty, crime, injustice, racial conflict, and other real-life aspects of the American past. The first is the membership of museum governing boards and those who make financial decisions concerning support of exhibits. Men and women in those positions prefer to see positive, consensus-building renditions of the past with emphasis on leaders and role models (including minority role models). The museum audience is also a constraint: visitors are perceived as seeking not real history but strong doses of family entertainment appropriate for an afternoon's outing.

The collection of twelve essays is sufficiently varied in subject matter and style that a wide range of museum-related readers will find topics of importance. Gary Kulik's fine survey of the historical development of the museum exhibit and Thomas Schlereth's thoughtful analysis of the relationships between museums and material culture are recommended reading for volunteers, museum trustees, and just about anyone seriously involved with policy formulation or programming in any museum regardless of size or subject matter. Historian Michael Wallace's essay, "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," takes direct issue with what he refers to as places "blurring the line between entertainment center and museum" (159). Wallace notes that while the story line in EPCOT's American Adventure state-of-the-art technology presentation ostensibly responds to the work of the new social historians, it ignores the history of labor and even the notion of the existence of the American labor unions. Furthermore, he writes, the show contains "no 1960s ghetto uprisings, no campus protests, . . . no Watergate . . . nothing about Vietnam" (177). Historian Wallace argues that the 29-minute show appears to tell the history of the United States in its entirety, thus leaving viewers less able to distinguish between plausible fiction and real history in the lives of their nation and their communities.

Leon and Rosenzweig have assembled a study that should be read and pondered by all who have roles to play in American museums in the 1990s. One of the most important questions asked by the contributors to this volume is, can the history museums of today communicate and interpret the past for a multicultural audience trained daily to receive information in short sound bites? A guarded yes, they say, provided a team of scholars, exhibit designers, and educators is assembled, motivated, and supported by museum administrators and trustees. Even then, this team must produce an interrelated series of products (exhibits, films, live costumed interpretation, and the like) that can overcome barriers to communication which only begin with

the radical difference between the material world of many American pasts and the age of the boom box, the home video, and the microwave oven.

I wish that *History Museums in the United States* gave more attention to the visitors, the audience that uses these museums. While museum visitors certainly come for recreation or for diversion, they come primarily because museums, better than any other medium, open up a complex world that they seek to understand and to which they wish to introduce young people. On one level, the world revealed in the history museum is a world of cultural inheritance, but on another level it is a world of the universal human condition, of limitations and wide-open possibilities. It is in enabling visitors to reach into the world of the human condition that museums can best take advantage of the methods and conclusions of today's historians. Museums can and do look just beyond the cutoff jeans, mirror sunglasses, and bored facial masks of their visitors to reach people who are there because they are very much interested in learning how real people of the past—those same people revealed in the new social history—struggled, failed, prevailed, and survived. After all, it is not in the cruelty, crassness, and injustice of the past that history's lessons lie, but rather in the wonder of the human body and spirit—individual and collective—that brings hope, purpose, art, and love generation after generation despite all that happens. Making contact with that wondering audience is the role and challenge of the history museums of the 1990s.

Leon and Rosenzweig have assembled a thought-provoking collection. They have given museums and historians a place to start their thinking about the future.

Heartland Blacksmiths: Conversations at the Forge, by Richard Reichelt, photographs by Richard Wilbers and Richard Reichelt. Shawnee Books. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988. x, 177 pp. Illustrations. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY WAYNE FRANKLIN, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

"No ideas but in things," claimed the twentieth-century American physician-poet William Carlos Williams. What Williams meant—that our intellectual life should arise from the practice of living—would be well appreciated by the nine midwestern blacksmiths interviewed by Richard Reichelt between 1984 and 1987. The smiths in question came to their craft by various routes, but all of them seem to persist in

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